



January 13, 2013

An open letter to Mayor Bratina and Members of Hamilton City Council,

We understand you may be considering the *Our Voice. Our Hamilton.* project at the General Issues Committee meeting on January 14, 2013. We respectfully submit this letter to provide some information for your consideration of the issue, along with a request to speak as a delegation.

Together with the City of Hamilton, we chose to be silent the last few days and listen to the comments that have been made. We now know this silence was a mistake. We believe in having conversations even though at times they may be difficult. We believe in inclusion, diversity of opinion and respect for all. These are values we hold dear and our silence has been contrary to those values. Our job is to be guardian of the process, and to ensure all voices are valued and heard. **Through this letter, and another one to the citizens of Hamilton, we are speaking up so that the conversation can be fuller, richer and open.**

To start, we would like to take responsibility for many of the events that have transpired since January 7th. Specifically, we are sorry for asking for clarification about what HSR is, and for planning an event on January 17th which conflicts with another community event. We take responsibility for the security breaches on our website that allowed a virus to be inserted and for not being more rigid with the moderation of our Community Priorities survey. We created the Pinterest page and therefore take responsibility for the images that appeared there. **For this we are sorry.**

There have been some who have appeared to be more vocal and passionate this week. **The loudest voices do not represent all and behind those loud voices have been many others who have not been heard.** It's easy to lose sight of those who want to participate when all you hear is negativity, or when there are very loud voices speaking. We know from experience it is harder to give voice to what you do want, and easier to criticize and say what you do not want. Hundreds of people have asked to be signed up for the newsletter and have already participated in the online opportunities. There are different voices saying very different things. We want to be clear – it doesn't mean the loud voices aren't important and we definitely want to hear from them. We respect the important issues they have raised. But they don't speak for all Hamiltonians, and the loudness and disrespect of some have silenced the voices of others.



Important issues have been raised that require more conversation. Distrust in the City's decision-making and spending choices, Dialogue Partners' and the City's credibility, use of the input from this conversation and other engagement processes, respect and inclusion of all voices in City governance, some participant's experience of City hosted public engagement processes, and the substantive issue at hand – City services. There is a passion, interest and desire in the community to talk about these things.

It's hard to convey respect, openness, curiosity and trustworthiness in 140 characters or less. We're still figuring out what this means for the use of Twitter in situations of mistrust and emotion. We know from experience you can't resolve conflict in short bursts of opinion, and it requires in depth conversation. You also can't have a full and thoughtful conversation in sound bites, and you can't solve complex problems that way either.

Never underestimate the power of a group. We've always known, respected, and advocated for the power of people's voices. We think Twitter users asked important questions about the project, our role, our payment, and our knowledge. However, somewhere in the tweeting frenzy on Monday and Tuesday the tone became about taking down Dialogue Partners instead of talking about City services, City needs, or building a community.

A meaningful, inclusive process is critical. The process we have designed for *Our Voice. Our Hamilton.* is inclusive, focused on a rich and thoughtful conversation about City services designed to gather input in ways that works for all Hamiltonians. We stand by the process we have designed and believe it is the right one for the City. We believe it is critically important that the process engage with ALL Hamiltonians from all walks of life, and from many different experiences and demographics. Our process will do that. We know a group has organized over the use of a different online tool – we're very familiar with this tool but we know that one cool tool doesn't reach everyone, allow for respectful discourse, take the conversation beyond a surface level or increase understanding. One online tool isn't a replacement to a meaningful conversation with all Hamiltonians.

Public engagement can be emotional, controversial and doesn't flow in a straight line. We've always known that, and we've always expected to have to adapt and be flexible in a process so we can be responsive to what emerges and to people's needs. It takes courage to NOT jump to judgment or conclusion when voices get loud and to allow space for a diversity of views in a full conversation.

There are reasons to hire firms from outside the community that don't have a bias, opinion or stake in the conversation. Having a stated opinion on City services, a view on City Hall, advocating for your own services to be retained, belittling those who have different views that you do – these kinds of things would impact the engagement process significantly and would not serve the needs of all Hamiltonians. Hiring someone from outside the community means they need to learn more about the community, but it also means they don't have a stake in the outcome of the conversation.

We are not a “stranger to competence.” Dialogue Partners is known internationally for our good work in public engagement on complex and complicated issues. We “specialize in civic engagement in situations of high emotion, conflict or controversy”. We’ve worked on issues such as nuclear waste, inner-city school closures, spending priorities for municipal services and budgets, healing and reconciliation for Inuit people, environmental justice, decades long conflicts with threats of blockades and bombings to hydro stations, community conflict in recovery from massive bush fires and flooding, water as a human right, time deferrals for blood donation by men who have sex with men and more. These kinds of issues typify the work we do – high emotion and high stakes.

We’ve won awards from the Canadian Association for Municipal Administrators in innovation for citizen engagement and a number of awards from the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) for ethical and integral projects that align with the very best public engagement standards, Core Values and best practices.

We honour all voices, and help everyone find a path forward they can live with. We are ethical in our practice and respect and reflect the views of all equally, and we have extensive experience dealing with issues of power, equity and inclusion.

We’d like to set the record straight. There has been a lot of misinformation and inaccuracy in the last week, and we’d like to provide a full answer to some of those issues. We have attached a “setting the record straight” document for your consideration.

We are humbled. By the power of people’s voice, their emotion and passion for their City. We’ve always said people can do anything if they come together with intention to make their voices heard. We respect the power and passion of their voices. We respect all Hamiltonians – those who have spoken out loudly, those who have spoken to us, and those who are silent on the issue. We think every Hamiltonian deserves a right to a voice in this important conversation, in an environment of respect, inclusion and caring.

We have heard that Hamiltonians want to talk about City services and more. We have received rich and thoughtful comments so far that have not received the same attention as the issues covered in the media. Hundreds of people provided input on City services in the first three days of the project. We encourage the City to continue this important discussion.

Sincerely,
Stephani Roy McCallum

Managing Director
Dialogue Partners

